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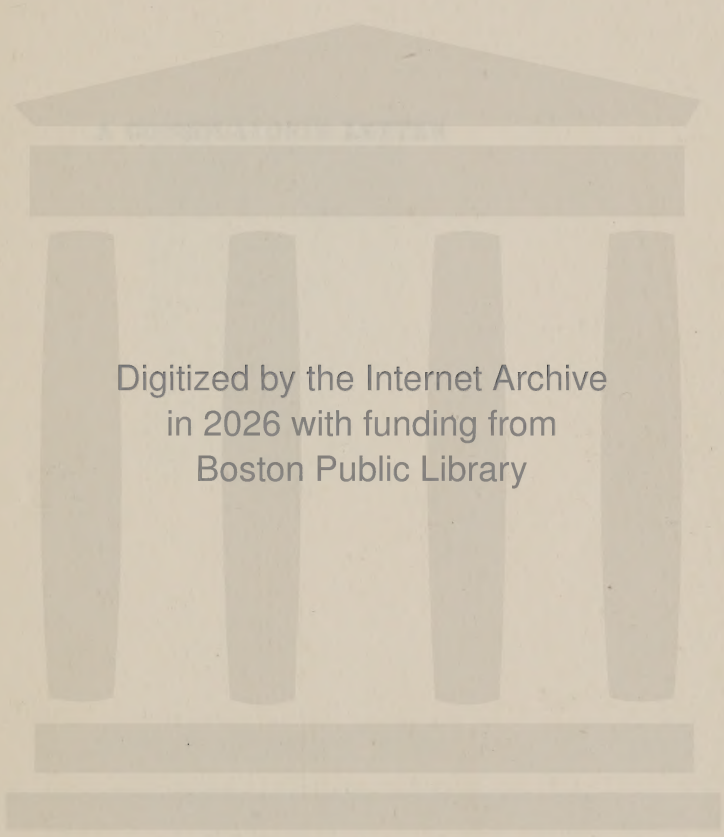
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A CONSOLATORIE LETTER

A CONSOLATORIE LETTER

OR DISCOURSE

SENT BY PLUTARCH OF CHÆRONEA UNTO HIS OWNE WIFE AS TOUCHING THE DEATH OF HER AND HIS DAUGHTER

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NOTE

THIS version of Plutarch's Consolatorie Letter first appeared in Philemon Holland's translation of 'the Philosophie commonly called the Morals written by the learned philosopher, Plutarch of Chæronea,' published in 1603. The present printing follows the text of the 'newly revised and corrected' edition of 1657.

PLUTARCH *being from home, and far absent, received newes concerning the death of a little daughter of his, a girle about two years old, named* Timoxena, *a child of gentle nature, and of great hope: but fearing that his wife would apprehend such a losse too neer unto her heart, he comforteth her in this letter, and by giving testimony unto her of vertue and constancy shewed at the death of other children of hers, more forward in age than she was; he exhorteth her likewise to patience and moderation in this new occurrence and trial of hers; condemning by sundry reasons the excessive sorrow, and unworthy fashion of many fond mothers, shewing withall the inconveniences that such excessive heavinesse draweth after it. Then continuing his consolation of her, he declareth with what eye we ought to regard infants and children as well before, as during and after life; how happy they be, who can content themselves and rest in the will and pleasure of God; that the*

blessings past, ought to dulce and mitigate the calamities present, to stay us also, that we proceed not to that degree and height of infortunity, as to make account onely of the misadventures and discommodities hapning in this our life. Which done, he answereth to certain objections which his wife might propose and set on foot; and therewith delivereth his own advice as touching the incorruption and immortality of mans soul (after he had made a medly of divers opinions which the ancient Philosophers held as touching that point); and in the end concludeth: That it is better and more expedient to die betimes, than late: which position of his he confirmeth by an ordinance precisely observed in his own country, which expressly forbade to mourn and lament for those who departed this life in their childhood.

PLUTARCH UNTO HIS WIFE GREETING

THE messenger whom you sent of purpose, to bring me word as touching the death of our little daughter, went out of his way (as I suppose) and so missed of me, as he journeyed toward *Athens;* howbeit, when I was arrived at *Tanagra,* I heard that she had changed this life.

Now, as concerning the funerals and enterring of her, I am verily perswaded, that you have already taken sufficient order, so as that the thing is not to do; and I pray God, that you have performed that duty in such sort, that neither for the present, nor the time to come, it work you any grievance and displeasure: but if haply you have put off any such complements (which you were willing enough of your selfe to accomplish) until you knew my mind and pleasure, thinking that in so doing, you should with better will and more patiently bear this

adverse accident, then I pray you, let the same be performed without all curiosity and superstition; and yet I must needs say, you are as little given in that way as any woman that I know: this only I would admonish you (deare heart), that in this case, you shew (both in regard of your selfe and also of me) a constancy and tranquility of mind; for mine own part, I conceive and measure in mine own heart this losse, according to the nature and greatnesse thereof, and so I esteem of it accordingly; but if I should finde that you took it impatiently, this would be much more grievous unto me and wound my heart more, than the calamity it selfe that causeth it; and yet am I not begotten and born either of an Oak or a Rock; whereof you can bare me good witnesse, knowing that we both together have reared many of our children at home in house, even with our own hands; and how I loved this girle most tenderly, both for that you were very desirous (after four sons, one after another in a row) to bear a

daughter, as also for that in regard of that fancy, I took occasion to give her your name; now besides that natural fatherly affection which commonly men have toward little babes, there was one particular property that gave an edge thereto, and caused me to love her above the rest; and that was a special grace that she had, to make joy and pleasure, and the same without any mixture at all of curstnesse or frowardnesse, and nothing given to whining and complaint; for she was of a wonderful kind and gentle nature, loving she was again to those that loved her, and marvellous desirous to gratifie and pleasure others; in which regards, she both delighted me, and also yeelded no small testimony of rare debonairity that nature had endued her withal; for she would make prety meanes to her nurse, and seem (as it were) to entreat her to give the brest or pap, not onely to other infants, like her selfe, her play feeres, but also to little babies and puppets, and such like gawds as little ones take

joy in, and wherewith they use to play; as if upon a singular courtesie and humanity she could find in her heart to communicate and distribute from her own table, even the best things that she had, among them that did her any pleasure. But I see no reason (sweet wife) why these lovely qualities and such like, wherein we took contentment and joy in her life time, should disquiet and trouble us now, after her death, when we either think or make relation of them: and I fear againe, lest by our dolour and grief we abandon and put clean away all the remembrance thereof, like as *Clymene* desired to do, when she said:

I hate the bow so light of cornel tree:
All exercise abroad, farewell for me;

as avoiding alwayes and trembling at the remembrance and commemoration of her son, which did no other good but renew her grief and dolour; for naturally we seek to flee all that troubleth and offendeth us. We ought

therefore so to demean our selves, that as whiles she lived, we had nothing in the world more sweet to embrace, more pleasant to see, or delectable to hear than our daughter; so the cogitation of her may still abide and live with us all our life time, having by many degrees our joy multiplyed more than our heavinesse augmented; if it be meet and fit that the reasons and arguments which we have often times delivered to others, should profit us when time and occasion requireth, and not lie still and idle for any good we have by them, nor challenge and accuse us, for that, in stead of joyes past, we bring upon our selves many more griefs by far. They that have come unto us report thus much of you, and that with great admiration of your vertue, that you never put on mourning weed, nor so much as changed your robe, and that by no means you could be brought to disfigure your selfe, or any of your waiting maidens and women about you, nor offer any outrage or injury to them in this behalfe;

neither did you set out her funerals with any sumptuous panegyrical pomp, as if it had been some solemn feast, but performed every thing soberly and civilly, after a still manner, accompanied only with our kinsfolk and friends. But my selfe verily made no great wonder that you (who never took pride and pleasure to be seen, either in Theater or in publick procession, but rather alwayes esteemed all such magnificence so vain, and sumptuosity superfluous, even in those things that tended to delight) have observed the most safe way of plainnesse and simplicity, in these occasions of sorrow and sadness. For a vertuous and chaste Matron ought not to onely keep her selfe pure and inviolate in Bacchanal feasts; but also to think thus with her selfe, that the turbulent storms of sorrow and passionate motions of anguish had no lesse need of continency to resist and withstand, not the naturall love and affection of mothers to their children, as many think, but intemperance of the mind. For we

allow and graunt unto this natural kindnesse, a certain affection to bewaile, to reverence, to wish for, to long after, and to beare in mind those that are departed; but the excessive and insatiable desire of lamentations, which forceth men and women to loud out-cries, to knock, beat, and mangle their own bodies, is no lesse unseemly and shamefull, than incontinence in pleasures: howbeit, it seemeth by good right to deserve excuse and pardon, for that in this undecency, there is grief and bitterness of sorrow adjoyned, whereas, in the other, pleasure and delight: for what is more absurd and senslesse, than to seem for to take away excesse of laughter and mirth; but contrariwise to give head unto streams of tears which proceed from one fountain and to suffer folk to give themselves over to weeping and lamentation as much as they will; as also that which some use to do, namely, to chide and rebuke their wives for some sweet perfumes, odoriferous pomanders, or purple garments, which they are desirous

to have; and in the meanwhile permit them to tear their hair in time of mourning, to shave their heads, to put on black, to sit unseemly upon the bare ground, or in ashes, and in most painful manner to cry out upon God and man; yea, and that which of all others is worst, when their wives chastise excessively, or punish unjustly their servants, to come between and stay their hands; but when they rigorously and cruelly torment themselves, to let them alone and neglect them in those crosse accidents, which contrariwise had need of facility and humanity? But between us twain, sweet heart, there was never any need of such fray or combat, and I suppose there will never be. For to speak of that frugality which is seen in plain and simple apparel, or of sobriety in ordinary dyet, and tending of the body: never was there any Philosopher yet conversing with us in our house, whom you put not down and struck into an extraordinary amaze, nor so much as a Citizen whom you caused not to admire (as a

strange and wonderful sight, whether it were in publick sacrifices, or in frequent theaters, and solemn processions) your rare simplicity: semblably, heretofore you shewed great constancy upon the like conflict and accident at the death of your eldest son; and again when that gentle and beautiful *Charon* departed from us untimely, in the prime of his years; and I remember well that certain strangers who journeyed with me along from the sea side (at what time as word was brought of my sons death) came home with others to my house, who seeing all things there setled, nothing out of order, but all silent and quiet (as they themselves afterward made report), began to think that the said news was false, and no such calamity had hapned; so wisely had you composed all matters within house, when as I wis, there was good occasion given that might have excused some disorder and confusion: and yet this son you were nurse unto your selfe, and give it suck at your own pap; yea, and endured

the painful incision of your breast, by reason of a cancerous hard tumor that came by a contusion. Oh, the generosity of a vertuous dame, and behold the kindnesse of a mother toward her children! whereas you shall see many other mothers to receive their young babes at the hands of their nurses, to dandle and play withal, forsooth, in mirth and pastime: but afterwards the same women (if their infants chance to die) give themselves over to all vain mourning, and bootlesse sorrow, which proceedeth, not doubtlesse from good will indeed (for surely hearty affection is reasonable, honest and considerate), but rather from a foolish opinion mingled with a little natural kindnesse; and this is it that engendereth savage, furious, implacable sorrows. And verily *Æsope* (as it should seem) was not ignorant hereof, for he reporteth this narration: 'That when *Jupiter* made a dole or distribution of honours among the gods and goddesses, *Sorrow* came afterwards and made suit likewise to be honoured,

and so he bestowed upon her, tears, plaints, lamentations; but for them only who are willing thereto, and ready to give her entertainment. And I assure you, this they commonly do at the very beginning; for everyone of his own accord bringeth in, and admitteth sorrow unto him, who (after she is once entertained, and in processe of time well setled, so that she is become domestical and familiar) will not be driven out of dores nor be gone, if a man would never so faine; and therefore resistance must be made against her, even at the very gate, neither ought we to abandon our hold, and quit the fort, renting our garments, rearing or shearing our hairs, or doing other such things, as ordinarily happen every day; causing a man to be confused, shameful and discouraged, making his heart base, abject and shut up, that he cannot enlarge it, but remain poor and timorous; bringing him to this passe, that he dare not be merry, supposing it altogether unlawful to laugh, to come abroad and see the sunne-

light, to converse with men, or to eat or drink in company; into such a captivity is he brought through sorrow and melancholy: upon this inconvenience, after it hath once gotten head, there followeth the neglect of the body, no care of annointing or bathing, and generally a retchlessenesse and contempt of all things belonging to this life; whereas contrariwise and by good reason, when the mind is sick or amisse, it should be helped and sustained by the strength of an able and cheerfull body; for a great part of the souls grief is allayed, and the edge thereof as it were dulled, when the body is fresh and disposed to alacrity, like as the waves of the sea be laid even, during a calme and fair weather: but contrariwise, if by reason that the body be evil entreated, and not regarded with good diet and choice keeping, it is become dried, rough and hard, in such sort, as from it there breathe no sweet and comfortable exhalations unto the soul, but all smoaky and bitter vapours of dolour, griefe, and sadnesse annoy

her; then is it no easie matter for men (be they never so willing and desirous) to recover themselves, but that their souls being thus seized upon by so grievous passions, will be afflicted and tormented still. But that which is most dangerous and dreadful in this case, I never feared in your behalfe (to wit), That foolish women should come and visit you, and then fall aweeping, lamenting, and crying with you; a thing (I may say to you) that is enough to whet sorrow, and awaken it if it were asleep, not suffering it either by itselfe, or by means of help and succour from another, to passe, fade, and vanish away; for I know very well what ado you had, and into what a conflict you entered about the sister of *Theon*, when you would have assisted her, and resisted other women who came in to her with great cries and loud lamentations, as if they brought fire with them, in all haste to maintain and encrease that which was kindled already. True it is indeed, that when a friends or neighbours house is seen on fire, every man

runneth as fast as he can to help for to quench the same: but when they see their souls burning in griefe and sorrow, they contrariwise bring more fewel and matter still to augment, or keep the said fire: also if a man be diseased in his eyes, he is not permitted to handle, or touch them with his hands, especially if they be blood-shotten, and possessed with any inflammation; whereas he who sits mourning and sorrowing at home in his house, offereth and presenteth himselfe to the first commer, and to every one that is willing to irritate, stir, and provoak his passion (as it were a floud or stream that is let out and set a running), insomuch as where before the grievance did but itch or smart a little, it now begins to shoot, to ake, to be fell and angry, so that it becometh a great and dangerous malady in the end: but I am verily perswaded (I say) that you know how to preserve your selfe from these extremities. Now over and besides, endeavour to reduce and call again to mind the time when as we had not this daugh-

ter, namely, when she was as yet unborn; how we had no cause then to complain of fortune; then, see you join (as it were with one tenon) this present, with that which is past, setting the case as if we were returned again to the same state wherein we were before: for it will appear (my good wife) that we are discontented that ever she was born, in case we make shew that we were in better condition before her birth than afterwards; not that I wish we should abolish out of our remembrance the two years space between her nativity and decease; but rather count and reckon it among other our pleasures and blessings, as during which time we had the fruition of joy, mirth and pastime, and not to esteem that good which was but little and endured a small while, our great infortunity; nor yet seem unthankful to fortune, for the favour which she hath done unto us, because she added not thereto that length of life which we hoped and expected. Certes, to rest contented always with the gods; to think and speak of

them reverently as it becometh; not to complain of fortune, but to take in good worth whatsoever it pleaseth her to send, bringeth evermore a fair and pleasant fruit: but he who, in these cases, putteth out of remembrance the good things that he hath, transporting and turning his thoughts and cogitations from obscure and troublesome occurrents, unto those which be clear and resplendent; if he do not by this means utterly extinguish his sorrow, yet at leastwise by mingling and tempering it with the contrary, he shal be able to diminish or else make it more feeble: for like as a sweet odour and fragrant ointment delighteth and refresheth alwayes the sense of smelling, and besides is a remedy against stinking savours: even so the cogitation of these benefits which men have otherwise received serveth as a most necessary and present succour in time of adversity unto as many as refuse not to remember and call to mind their joyes passed, and who never at all for any accident whatsoever com-

plain of fortune; which we ought not to do in reason and honesty, unlesse we would seem to accuse and blame this life which we enjoy, for some crosse or accident; as if we cast away a book, if it have but one blur or blot in it, being otherwise written throughout most clean and fair; for you have heard it oftentimes said, that the beatitude of those who are departed dependeth upon the right and sound discourses of our understanding, and the same tending to one constant disposition; as also, that the changes and alterations of fortune bear no great sway, to infer much declination or casualty in our life: but if we also as the common sort must be ruled and governed by external things without us, if we reckon and count the chances and casualties of fortune, and admit for judges of our felicity or misery, the base and vulgar sort of people; yet take you no heed to those tears, plaints, and moans that men or women make who come to visit you at this present, who also (upon a foolish custome, and as

it were of course) have them ready at command for every one; but rather consider this with your selfe: how happy you are reputed, even by those who come unto you, who would gladly and with all their hearts be like unto you, in regard of those children whom you have, the house and family which you keep, and the life that you lead; for it were an evil thing to see others desire to be in your estate and condition for all the sorrow which now afflicteth us, and your selfe in the mean time complaining and taking in ill part the same, and not to be so happy and blessed, as to find and feele (even by this crosse that now pincheth you, for the losse of one Infant) what joy you should take, and how thankful you ought to be for those who remain alive with you; for herein you should resemble very well those Criticks, who collect and gather together all the lame and defective verses of *Homer*, which are but few in number; and in the mean time passe over an infinite sort of others, which were by

him most excellently made. In this manner (I say) you did, if you would search narrowly, and examine every particular mishap in this life, and find fault therewith; but all good blessings in grose, let go by, and never once respect the same; which to do, were much like unto the practise of those covetous misers, worldlings, and penni-fathers, who cark and care, punish both body and mind, until they have gathered a great deale of good together, and then enjoy no benefit or use thereof; but if they chance to forgo any of it, they keep a piteous wailing and woful lamentation.

Now if haply you have compassion and pity of the poor girle, in that she went out of this world a maid unmarried, and before that she bare any children, you ought rather on the contrary side, to rejoyce and take delight in your selfe above others, for that you have not failed of these blessings, nor been disappointed either of the one or the other: for who would hold and maintain that these things should be

great to those who be deprived of them and but small to them who have and enjoy the same? As for the Child, who doubtlesse is gone into a place where she feeleth no paine, surely she requireth not at our hands that we should afflict and grieve ourselves for her sake: for what harm is there befallen unto us by her, if she her selfe now feele no hurt? And as for the losses of great things indeed, surely they yeeld no sense at all of dolour, when they are once come to this point, that there is no more need of them, or care made for them. But verily, thy daughter *Timoxena* is bereft, not of great matters, but of small things; for in truth, she had no knowledge at all, but of such, neither delighted she in any, but in such: seeing then, that she had no perceivance nor thought of those things, how can she properly and truely be said to be deprived thereof?

Moreover, as touching that which you heard of others, who are wont to perswade many of the vulgar sort, saying, That the soul, once de-

parted from the body, is dissolved, and feeleth no pain or dolour at all: I am assured that you yeeld no credit and beliefe to such positions; as well in regard of those reasons and instructions which you have received by tradition from our Ancestors, as also of those sacred and symbolical mysteries of *Bacchus*, which we know well enough, who are of that religious confraternity, and professed therein. Being grounded therefore in this principle, and holding it firmly for an undoubted truth: That our soul is incorruptible and immortal; you are to think that it fareth with it, as it doth with little birds that are caught by the fowler alive, and come into mans hands: for if it have been kept and nourished daintily a long time within the body, so that it be inured to be gentle and familiar unto this life, to wit, by the management of sundry affairs and long custome, it returneth thither again, and re-entreth a second time (after many generations) into the body: it never taketh rest nor ceaseth, but is inwrapped within the affec-

tions of the flesh, and entangled with the adventures of the world, and calamities incident to our nature: for I would not have you to think that old age is to be blamed and reproached for rivels and wrinkles, nor in regard of hoary white haires, nor yet for the imbecility and feeblenesse of the body; but the worst and most odious thing in it, is this: That it causeth the soul to take corruption by the remembrance of those things whereof it had experience whiles it stayed therein, and was too much addicted and affectionate unto it, whereby it bendeth and boweth, yea, and retaineth that form or figure which it took of the body, by being so long devoted thereto, whereas that which is taken away in youth pretendeth a better estate and condition, as being framed to a gentler habit, more soft, tractable and less compact, putting on now a natural rectitude, much like as fire, which being quenched, if it be kindled again, burneth out and recovereth vigour incontinently: which is the cause that it is far better

Betimes to yeeld up vital breath,
And soon to passe the gates of death,

before that the soul have taken too deep an imbibition, or liking of terrene things here below, and ere it be made soft and tender with the love of the body, and (as it were) by certain medicines and forcible charms united and incorporate into it. The truth hereof may appear yet better by the fashions and ancient customes of this Countrey; for our Citizens (when their children die young) neither offer mortuaries, nor perform any sacrifices and ceremonies for them, as others are wont to do for the dead: the reason is, because they have no part of earth nor earthly affections; neither do they keep about their tombs and sepulchres, nor lay forth the dead corps abroad to bee seen of men, nor sit near unto their bodies: for our laws and statutes do not permit and suffer any mourning at all for those that so depart in their minority, as being a custome not holy and religious; for

that we are to think they passe into a better place and happier condition: Which ordinances and customes, since it is more dangerous not to give credit unto, than beleeve, let us carry and demeane ourselves according as they command, for outward order; as for within, all ought to be more pure, wise and uncorrupt.

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